

# Against the Grain

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## Google Docs: A Review

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# Google Docs: A Review

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## Introduction

Librarians are continually challenged to find new and better ways to collaborate. In today's world, it has become increasingly difficult to get everyone together in the same room, much less at the same time. But there's hope. **Google Docs** is an application that can help solve this problem. As with other Web 2.0 applications, the hallmarks of **Google Docs** are sharing, flexibility and simplicity. Users can edit documents simultaneously via the Web and can see the changes in real-time, or alternatively work in the more traditional asynchronous manner more common in blogs and wikis and other collaborative tools. Librarians are beginning to take this one step further and have even begun using **Google Docs** to replace **PowerPoint** and other "traditional" applications in creating presentations, spreadsheets and other documents.

In just our limited experience, we have used **Google Docs** as a collaborative word processing tool to write an article, to gather and compile data in a spreadsheet and as a replacement for **PowerPoint** in creating presentations for professional conferences. In fact, we used

**Google Docs** to write this article. Based on this experience, we will give a brief overview of **Google Docs** and its functionality and chronicle the uses we have found for this tool. We will also discuss some of the commonalities between **Google Docs** and other existing applications, and in so doing, detail some of the strengths and weaknesses as compared to these products.

## Commonalities

Currently, **Google Docs** encompasses Web-based applications for word processing, spreadsheet work, and presentations. **Google** has named these three tools simply **Documents**, **Spreadsheets**, and **Presentations**. All three have been developed with a "just in time" philosophy — when users demand more, **Google** will make more features available. But, for now, **Google's Documents**, **Spreadsheets**, and **Presentations** offer just enough bare bones features to allow users to create, share, and publish basic files.

Already existing files in **Word**, **PowerPoint**, **Excel**, **Open Office**, csv, rtf, and .sxw formats can be imported directly into **Google**

**Docs**. Moreover, brand new files can be created directly in any of these three tools. Once a file exists, they can be shared not only with any Gmail address but also with institutional, business, or any other type of email account. Completed documents from any of the three **Google Docs** tools can be exported into any of the aforementioned programs and file types as well as directly into HTML or PDF. In addition, one especially helpful feature is that **Google** automatically saves the document as users work. Then, in case of power loss or other catastrophic event, users can go back into **Google Documents** under the Revisions tab and see the history of edits and retrieve the most recently saved document.

Common limitations also exist between all three tools. Like many of the other Web 2.0 tools becoming so popular, **Google Documents** will not perform with **Opera**, **Safari**, and older **Netscape** Web browsers. In addition, as will be discussed further, there are few font choices, only a few presentation templates and many other options taken for granted by users of **Microsoft Office** applications will not be available. Additionally, while many **Microsoft Office Suite** files can be uploaded into the **Google** applications, users will likely quickly discover that **Office 2007** is not yet compatible. In addition, while one can share with any email account, only **Google** account holders will actually be able to work in and edit any **Google** document.

## Spreadsheet

When technology reviewers got a sneak peak at **Google Spreadsheets** in June of 2006, they wasted no time comparing it to its closest equivalent, **Excel**. As most pointed out, the free, Web-based tool offered considerably fewer features than its commercial counterpart, and while in some respects this continues to be true, the addition of new features to **Spreadsheets** means that some of its capabilities today actually exceed that of **Excel**. Determining whether to use **Excel** or **Spreadsheets**, then, will depend in large part on the needs of the user. For simple spreadsheets whose creators have no need for advanced data tools, engineering or cubical functions, or collaborative real-time sharing technology, both **Excel** and **Spreadsheets** work equally well. Even more importantly, most content creators with a simple design who begin with one and for some reason decide to switch to the other will have little trouble transferring data between the two.

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## against the grain people profile

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### Julie Silver George

**BORN AND LIVED:** I was born in Havertown PA and moved to KY in my teens.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** I worked for the first three years of my career in the public library world and have spent the last eight years in academic libraries in reference and instruction.

**FAMILY:** I am married and have two small children.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** In my spare time, I volunteer at my church and look for creative ways to entertain my children.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Edwina, The Dinosaur Who Didn't Know She Was Extinct*; *Words and Pictures* by **Mo Willems**.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** Five years from now I hope that I am still just as excited about my job as I am currently.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** Five years from now I see the Academic Library as a vibrant physical place in the crazy online world. Students and faculty will seek out the physical library as the one place on a campus where they can talk face-to-face with a librarian, page through a book or periodical, work together with their colleagues and fellow students, and socialize. 🌿

The similarities between **Google Spreadsheets** and **Excel** are apparent from a simple glance. Both have an unlimited number of cells that can be manipulated in a variety of ways. Standard features include the ability to change the appearance of fonts, to add colors for emphasis and organization, and possibilities of adding and deleting rows, wrapping text, and inserting formulas. In addition, the **Spreadsheet** team at **Google** has added features since the product's debut that have considerably narrowed the gap between it and **Excel**. Among these are the AutoFill feature, an improved A-Z/Z-A sort bar, and the ability to freeze columns and to create charts (albeit with fewer templates than offered by **Excel**).

At the same time that the **Spreadsheet** updates have helped bridge the gap between it and **Excel**, they have also created new differences between the two. While **Excel** still has the upper hand in some data manipulation areas, including filtering abilities, it is users of the Web-based product who can take advantage of 2.0 integrations into their spreadsheets. One of the newest **Spreadsheet** features is the ability to create and distribute forms for others to complete. The results are automatically time stamped and integrated into the desired spreadsheet. This allows users to collect and input data from others without granting them access to the spreadsheet itself. Another function unique to **Google's** product is the ability to import data from other Web-based sources, such as stock information from **Google Finance** or your favorite RSS feeds, for example.

For what it does offer, **Google Spreadsheets** deserves to be counted as a useful tool for both individual users and collaborators alike. The sharing, publishing, and chatting features that make collaborating with **Documents** useful also apply to **Spreadsheets**. In

addition, users will find that the **Spreadsheets** design team does take into account user preferences and requests as indicated by several pages on their site. A team blog announces the latest additions and updates. A "Known Issues Page" identifies problems with the product and reports on the status of fixes, and the "Suggest a Feature" page serves as a poll of sorts to help the designers decide what **Excel**-like features to add next.

### Presentations

The **Presentations** application of **Google Docs**, the youngest member of the **Google Docs** family, was released in September 2007. If it is to be compared to **Microsoft's PowerPoint**, **Google Docs' Presentations** application could be considered bare bones. It allows users to create slides that have photos, links, charts and text. But, it does not contain any of the bells and whistles of **PowerPoint**. There is no audio, no animation, and the templates and backgrounds are limited. This may be a drawback for some users, especially in the business realm where customization and branded templates are standard. However, for many others, this focus on content as opposed to the tool is refreshing. The power of the presentation application is the ability to collaborate and share your work. Users can be in any location while viewing and editing the presentation. The edits and changes appear instantly. When using **Presentations** in front of an audience, one can project the slides onto a physical screen to be seen by the audience and others can view the presentation virtually by just following a link. The application is also paired with **Google Chat** so that discussion of the presentation can take place in a virtual environment. One must have a **Google** account to participate in the chat. While one can also upload or import slides from **PowerPoint** into **Google Docs**, users will lose many of the features of **PowerPoint** in this uploading process.

Downsides include difficulties backing up

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### Brad Marcum

**BORN & LIVED:** Irvine, KY. I recently bought a house and moved to Richmond, Kentucky.

**FAMILY:** Single with two sisters and a large extended family.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** I am an active presenter at regional and national conferences and primarily work with distance education students.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** I enjoy technology and spend a lot of time on the Web and tinkering with computers and other gadgets. I love to read, although my big screen tv has usurped a good chunk of my free time lately.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** Facebook apps that make you invite your friends to see results.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Forget "equivalent," I want "better!"

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** Almost impossible to predict. Anyone predicting anything is just wildly guessing. That said, I predict we will move even further down the road toward becoming information consultants and bearers of expertise rather than the traditional role of "keepers of knowledge." 🐼



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### Cindy Judd

**BORN & LIVED:** Orlando, FL; lived in Orlando, FL, Florence, KY, and Berea, KY.  
**EARLY LIFE:** I taught high school English and drama for six years before becoming a librarian.

**FAMILY:** Married with twin girls and a son.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** I have been a librarian for almost seven years; worked at **Berea College** for four years, and at **EKU** for two and a half; serve on two **ALA** committees.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** I enjoy watching college football and basketball and spending time with my family.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *The Kite Runner*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, and *The Glass Castle*. 🐼

the presentation so that it can be used when no Internet connection is available. Currently, the best option is to save as a PDF. However, the resulting PDF document will lose the entire "presentation feel." So, one must be connected to the Internet to access the presentation. Users can only upload documents smaller than 10Mb to **Google Docs**. Working with large, graphic heavy files will be difficult.

### Word Processing

The word processing application of **Google Docs**, useful for creating a variety of documents, such as articles and blog posts, to less formal documents, such as meeting and class notes, has several advantages. Users of **Google Documents** will note the simple and easy to use Web interface. Most users only use a few of the hundreds of features available in word processing programs like **Microsoft Word**. **Google Documents** offers only those necessary options to meet word processing needs, including basic formatting, options to insert images, links, tables, or special characters, and choices for exporting the file once it is finished. The ability to share a document with others is also helpful. Because **Google Documents** is Web-based, there is no need to save the file repeatedly and send to collaborators as an attachment. With **Google Documents**, users can create a document and simply send a link to colleagues, "sharing" the document with them. The original creator has control over who has access to the document and can allow others to edit it or to simply have access to view the document. Once the document is shared colleagues can add to the document and see revisions in real-time. This eliminates the need to send files back and forth, creating various editions of the document. The document is available to all contributors at any time from any computer with Internet access because it is stored online. **Google Documents** also lets users upload documents in a variety of familiar word processing file formats, including Word, Rich Text Format, and Open Office. The document can also be exported easily in a variety of formats, including HTML, RTF, Word, PDF, Open Office, and Text.

While the simplicity of **Google Documents** can be an advantage, it can also hinder a user who may prefer the bells and whistles of **Microsoft Word** and other similar software programs, particularly if the project requires a more professional look. Font size and types are still limited, for example. And while **Google Documents** meets the needs of many users, it is still only in BETA stages, which means it is constantly undergoing upgrades and changes. It is still not able to offer all of the stability of a tested product, such as **Microsoft Word**.

### Conclusion

**Google** has been very responsive to users since its launch of **Google Documents** in October 2006. **Google Documents**, which began



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### Nicole Montgomery

**BORN & LIVED:** Born in Minnesota but consider myself an eastern Kentucky gal and have the accent to prove it.

**FAMILY:** Husband, **Matt**. Cat, of course, **Cho**. The rest we're still figuring out.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** Currently, lots of home improvement projects.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *Winterdance* *The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod* by **Gary Paulsen**; *The Glass Castle* by **Jeanette Walls**; *A Girl Named Zippy* and *She Got Up Off the Couch* by **Haven Kimmel**.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** People who don't recycle even though it's so easy!

**PHILOSOPHY:** I often try to remind myself that the most important things in life aren't things.

**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** I interviewed one other time with my current organization and didn't get the job. Fate stepped in six months later, though, and the right opportunity and fit was finally there!

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** To learn to leave work at work. Is that a bad goal? 🌿



as a rework of **Writely**, a Web-based word processing program, has been enhanced based on the feedback of users in its discussion group pages, <http://groups.google.com/group/GoogleDocs/topics>. Features that have been added include improvements in printing, enhancements to headers and footers, easier integration between other **Google** products, saving in different file formats, and creating sub-folders.

While not the solution to every problem, **Google Docs** does offer a flexible and easy

to use platform for those not afraid to try new things. Its simplicity and "bare bones" toolkit is both a strength and a weakness, but it holds promise for a variety of applications and projects. Being accessible via the Web and the collaborative ease of creating content both in real-time and 24/7 are perhaps the most alluring features. In a head-to-head comparison with **Microsoft's Office Suite**, **Google Docs** will lose. However, what it does have going for it is the ability to collaborate, ease of use, and the best price point possible — it's FREE. 🌿

## Something to Think About — It's the Little Things!

Column Editor: **Mary E. (Tinker) Massey** (Serials Librarian, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Jack R. Hunt Library) <masse36e@erau.edu>

Sometimes we find things in our donation piles that look interesting or even great, but it's a one of a kind piece. What do you do with an original *Life* magazine issue from 1945 that has a special issue flavor covering women's role in the war, especially as flyers? You can't put just one issue on the shelf. Placing it on

the shelf would encourage it to curl and bend and be torn on a daily basis. Most people have replaced the real issues with fiche or film and this would be an oddity, to say the least. How about a stray annual report of a corporation that can't be obtained continuously? A how-to brochure? There are numerous kinds of material that would be additions to the knowledge we now have, but how do we house those small pieces? The vertical file is one answer

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